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Mental Illness Research, Education
and Clinical Center



MAJOR DEPRESSIVE DISORDER: Selecting a Psychotherapy That's Right for You



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What is Major Depressive Disorder?

Major Depressive Disorder, or MDD, is a common mood disorder. Signs of MDD include:

- Feelings of sadness, depression, emptiness, or hopelessness
- Loss of interest or pleasure in activities
- Increase or decrease in appetite
- Insomnia or broken sleep, or sleeping too much
- Restlessness or feeling slowed down
- Loss of energy or fatigue
- Feelings of worthlessness or having a lot of guilt
- Difficulty thinking clearly, or making decisions
- Thoughts of death, especially thoughts of suicide

It is important to know that MDD is more than just feeling down and “depressed” for a day or two. Those with MDD may notice problems in their relationships, difficulties at work or school, and even difficulties during daily activities.

When a person has these symptoms for more than 2 weeks, this is called a depressive episode. MDD is common. About 15–20% of Americans have MDD at some point in their lives. Biological factors (such as genetics, certain medical problems and the effects of some medications), stressful life events, and environmental stressors, may contribute to MDD.

American Psychiatric Association. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), Fifth edition. 2013.

Treatment for MDD

The good news is that MDD is a very treatable condition. There are many effective treatment options, including different types of psychotherapy and medication. This brochure will help you to learn about some of the treatment options available to you.

Selecting a treatment: Which one will be best for me?

Selecting a treatment for MDD is a personal decision. There is no one treatment that is “right” for everyone. While mental health providers can guide you through the decision-making process, they may not be able to tell you which option will be the best one for you. When thinking about your options, it is helpful to learn about different treatments and then consider the pros and cons of each. Factors to consider as you make your choice include, the time commitment of each, with whom you would be working, and how each treatment might address your specific goals.



The two main types of treatment for MDD are medication and psychotherapy (talk therapy). In general, people with mild forms of MDD tend to do very well with psychotherapy alone, particularly if it is their first depressive episode. Individuals with moderate and severe forms of MDD often need both medication and psychotherapy to support their recovery.

To help consider your options, ask your mental health provider about the severity of your MDD symptoms.

MDD Severity	Psychotherapy Alone	Medication Alone	Combination of Medication and Psychotherapy
Mild	★recommended★	available✓	available✓
Moderate	available✓	available✓	★recommended★
Severe	available✓	available✓	★recommended★

Department of Veterans Affairs & Department of Defense, 2016

How severe are your symptoms?

Questionnaire 9 (PHQ-9) can assist in making the initial diagnosis of MDD. This questionnaire helps you and your provider to understand the severity of your symptoms. The same questionnaire can be used throughout treatment to show how your symptoms are responding to treatment and to decide whether treatment changes might be helpful.

PHQ-9 Score	Severity Level
0 – 4	Minimal
5 – 9	Mild
10 – 14	Moderate
15 – 19	Moderately Severe
20 – 27	Severe

Kroenke, Spitzer, & Williams, 2001

Psychotherapy Options for MDD

There are several different types of psychotherapy for MDD. The three options described here have all been tested and shown to be effective treatments. They approach MDD in different ways, but all three involve learning new skills or strategies in session that are practiced between appointments. All three treatments are time-limited and focused on learning new skills and strategies.



Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for Depression (ACT-D)

In ACT-D, you learn to become more accepting of yourself, to have better relationships with others, and to improve functioning in personal situations.

You will learn to identify and take part in activities that are in line with what you care about. Doing activities you care about makes a difference in your life, as expressed by your emotions.

By participating in ACT-D, you learn to:

- (A) Accept
- (C) Choose
- (T) Take action



In ACT-D, you may learn to:

- **Be more present in the “here-and-now.”** Decrease being caught up in what happened in the past and frees yourself from worrying about the future. Being present helps you to more fully connect and enjoy the moment.
- **Observe thoughts and feelings in such a way that they no longer keep you “stuck” in life.** Learning to observe through openness and acceptance can help you find a sense of freedom from negative thoughts and feelings such that they no longer control your life.
- **Clarify values and then take action.** Finding what is most meaningful to you and choosing to act on these values are important parts of the therapy. This will be part of the process of building a rich and full life.

- Individual treatment
- 10-16 weekly sessions
- 60-minute sessions
- Involves weekly homework and practice between sessions

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy for Depression (CBT-D)

CBT-D is a short-term psychotherapy (talk therapy) that is designed to treat symptoms of MDD. Often when people experience depression they develop a negative view of themselves, other people, and their future. CBT-D aims to help you:

- CATCH** ▶ develop more awareness of your negative thoughts
- CHECK** ▶ examine whether the thought is accurate and useful
- CHANGE** ▶ develop more balanced and helpful thoughts

Your therapist will also work with you to look at your activities and think about whether these are helpful for your mood or whether you would want to make changes. You will learn to pay attention and change your activity levels to find a balance between

- Pleasant or enjoyable activities and
- Mastery activities that give a sense of achievement

It will be important for you to be open with your therapist (or group) about your thoughts, feelings, and reactions. Also, practicing the skills learned in treatment outside of session will be important to treating your depression.

You can engage in this treatment individually, or in a group. Individual treatment will help you and your therapist tailor the skills to your situation. Many Veterans prefer a group setting to feel the support of working with other Veterans to reach a common goal.

- One of the most studied and effective treatments for MDD
- Group or individual treatment options
- 12-16 weekly or biweekly sessions
- Involves homework and practice outside of session
- Groups of typically 6-12 Veterans per group

Interpersonal Psychotherapy for Depression (IPT)

IPT-D is a treatment designed to focus on one or two problems you want to work on related to your MDD

Common life problems include:

- Life changes, such as returning from active duty, dealing with health problems or injuries, or losing a job;
- Difficulties or problems with other people;
- Grief from the loss of an important person in your life, such as a spouse, friend, child, or fellow veteran; and
- Isolation that is unwanted, such as desiring to connect with others but being unable to start or maintain relationships.

In this treatment, you will work with your therapist to identify areas, such as these, which are a problem for you. Then your therapist will help you learn new skills to take action and address your problems. By fixing these specific issues, we usually see less depression, improved quality of life, and improved ability to handle life problems that are connected to depression.

Clougherty, Hinrichsen, Steele, Miller, Raffa, Stewart, & Karlin, 2014

- Individual treatment
- 12-16 weekly sessions
- 60-minute sessions
- Work with the therapist to address life problems that often cause or worsen depression (such as life changes, relationships with other people, and grief)

PSYCHOTHERAPY TREATMENT

Acceptance and
Commitment
Therapy for
Depression
(ACT-D)

Cognitive-
Behavioral Therapy
for Depression
(CBT-D)

Interpersonal
Psychotherapy
for Depression
(IPT-D)

NUMBER OF SESSIONS AND FORMAT

10-16 Individual
sessions

12-16 individual or
group sessions

12-16 individual
sessions

SESSION CONTENT You will learn to...

- Get unstuck from your thoughts and live in the “here and now”
- Accept the past and be open to the future
- Clarify your values and take action

- Develop balanced thoughts about yourself, others, and the world
- Engage in pleasant and productive activities

- Practice communication skills
- Explore conflicts in relationships
- Examine decision-making process

PRACTICE ASSIGNMENTS Between sessions you will...

- Practice being mindfully aware
- Participate in activities to improve quality of life

- Monitor and plan your daily activities
- Track your thoughts and examine them

- Apply skills learned in session at home
- Discuss issues with family that have been reviewed in session

Other Treatment Options

The treatment options listed so far are the most commonly available treatments in the VA for MDD, but other treatments are available and may be a fit for your particular needs. The self-management options below may be used alone for mild levels of MDD. You can speak with your provider about including them in a formal course of treatment.

Self-Management Strategies	Benefits
Nutrition and Exercise	Eating a healthy, balanced diet and getting regular exercise can help to manage symptoms of MDD.
Bibliotherapy	There are many self-help books available for managing MDD, some of which incorporate the therapies mentioned previously.
Sleep Hygiene	Taking steps to improve sleep routines has been shown to have a positive effect on MDD symptoms.
Pleasurable Activities	Engaging in activities that bring enjoyment can help to manage symptoms of MDD.

*Department of Veterans Affairs &
Department of Defense, 2016*

People with MDD may also have other mental health conditions, such as PTSD, alcohol or substance use disorder, chronic pain, or chronic insomnia. Treatment of these other conditions can often help improve the symptoms of MDD

Co-Occurring Condition	Treatment Options
Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)	Cognitive-Processing Therapy Prolonged Exposure Therapy Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing
Alcohol or Substance Use Disorder	Motivational Enhancement Therapy CBT for Substance Use Disorder Contingency Management
Chronic Pain	CBT for Chronic Pain
Chronic Insomnia	CBT for Insomnia
Marital or Family Problems	Integrated Behavioral Couples Therapy Behavioral Family Therapy
Major life events	Problem-Solving Therapy



Veterans Crisis Line



1-800-273-8255

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